

Sermon for the First Sunday After Christmas

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Merry Christmas, y'all. Phew, and Lord have mercy. I have to admit, most years, Christmas Eve is something I look forward to with all of my being. Advent is like a bridle holding me back, and then Christmas Eve, something drops the reins, and I'm off to the races. But this year? This year, I balked all the way through Advent. I didn't want to cancel services, but I also didn't want to do services. I wanted to mark another wonderful Christmas, but the last thing I wanted was to insist on services happening only to find we'd made headlines in our obstinance. Many of you saw this dilemma in conversations or even in the way I've been holding my shoulders. So, for the first time, maybe ever, I'm relieved to get to the Sunday After Christmas. All my consternation and trepidation are behind me, thank God, but I don't feel the release I was hoping for.

Instead, I'm still worried. I don't know what's right to do. I know some things, but The Thing isn't clear to me just yet. Maybe it never will be. Maybe we'll get some 20/20 hindsight in time, but for now, I'd give my left pinky toe to see just a few weeks into the future. I've been spending much of the past two years thinking about faith and trust and hope, all appropriate topics for the Christmas Season, but maybe a little more distant this year than most. I know my faith rests in God, but also, I'm really invested in advances in the medical world. Not that those things are contradictory, I'm just more aware this year that there are different kinds of faith. Like, I have more faith in God than ever before, but I also am gaining and losing faith in humanity, what we can do and what we can do.

In the days leading up to Christmas, a hospital in Cleveland took out a full-page ad in their paper that just said "HELP." Four big, bold letters surrounded by empty space, calling into the void while patients surged, patience wore out, and medical staff collapsed under the weight of ongoing tragedy and frustration.

HELP.

Someone. Please.

For much of my life, I thought I've known what it feels like to be overwhelmed or tired or frustrated. But, thank God, I've had the privilege to live in a way that made all those past experiences feel like they were tough, when in reality, while I have been through some stuff, I have never known this steady drudging beat-down, background static -- that sometimes becomes foreground static -- of stumbling blocks set between me and the freedom to live as I would like. Actually, I've heard a lot of folks express this idea. We're all tired, we're all weary, we're all searching for a way out and disappointed in or angry at our compatriots that can't seem to get their heads together long enough to do what's so obviously right.

I was talking about this with a friend the other day who said that, as a person of color, those feelings are nothing new for them. Sure, the COVID pandemic is new, but the experience of steady drudging beat-down, background static -- that sometimes becomes foreground static -- of stumbling blocks set between them and the freedom to live as they'd like? That's, unfortunately, old hat. My friend said there was a part of her that was glad to see everyone having to experience that feeling of being ground down. She wasn't happy that COVID existed, and she wasn't happy about the suffering and the death it caused, of course not. But she was hopeful that this experience might help other people understand what she lives through every day, even when things are supposedly good. This friend of mine also happens to be a person of great faith, and she has found so much strength and comfort over the years of grinding in our God. Like that paper in Cleveland, she has spoken that

one word in prayer more than any other. Help. And in that call in the abyss, she's found just that. Help, help from God.

Now, there's a pretty significant elephant in the room when it comes to things like Covid or structural racism or anything that causes suffering in our world. There is a major difference between things that just happen, like disease, and things that people are responsible for, like racism. Sometimes, suffering comes because chaos exists in the universe. And sometimes suffering comes because people can be terrible to each other. The call for help in the context of suffering isn't a call for God to relent because God isn't causing the suffering in the first place. The Book of Lamentations says, "God does not willingly grieve the children of God." The call for help is a call for God to give us the strength to endure, to push back, to stand for what is right and what is just in the face of unrelenting pressures to the contrary. I know that, when my friend has called for help over the years, she's been calling for God, but she's also been calling for people. Help. I know you can, I know you would, if you just saw what I'm living through. And I hear the same plea in that paper in Cleveland. Help. You. You people reading this, you people hearing this. Help. We know you can, we know you would, if only you knew. But also, God, help us. Give us the strength. Show the world what we have seen. Soften their hearts.

That, that right there is what Jesus was born into those many nights ago. That right there is what Jesus is born into just this week. Come into this world and show us how to love. Show us how to fix these things. Show us how to tear down what hinders us. Open the minds of our enemies and soften their hearts. Your Word Made Flesh brings light into even the darkest abyss, and God knows, we need that light now. More than anything, here, surrounded by empty space and facing down our many grinding disappointments, hear our prayer. Help.